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Living sculpture; Meticulously crafted tiny trees celebrate partnership of nature, man

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Body

You expect the ***tree***, commented one person, to spring suddenly to life, like an Ent in The Lord of the Rings. He was right. Not much more than a foot tall, the eastern white cedar, with its startling strip of pale, debarked trunk, hollowed interior and rich green foliage, looked ancient and wise, as though it should be towering over us instead of the other way around.

The cedar, at least 50 years old despite its diminutive size, was a dramatic example of shari, one of many styles of bonsai on display at a recent open house of the Ottawa Bonsai Society hosted by the Embassy of Japan. Bonsai (pronounced "bone-sigh") is the ancient oriental art of miniaturizing ***trees*** by growing them in pots and turning them into living ***sculptures*** by pruning and other techniques.

"Imagine that lightning has struck the ***tree*** and killed part of the bark," said Vianney Leduc, creator of that evocative little cedar. "The inside got rotten, but it's still clinging to life." Explaining that the miniature ***trees*** are often meant to tell a story, Leduc said that he had stripped the bark and hollowed out the cedar, which he'd found in the nutrient-poor soil of Kamouraska, Que., "to create interest and the illusion of age."

A striking example of bonsai is Yose-Ue, the style that involves grouping ***trees*** to simulate a tiny, perfect and slightly eerie forest complete with a winding path. Sekijoju show roots growing over rock, while Kengai is a graceful cascading style modelled after ***trees*** that grow over water or on mountainsides.

Thought to have originated in China some 2,000 years ago during the Han Dynasty, bonsai was subsequently adapted by the Japanese and others as an ornamental art. It found its way to North America when Second World War troops returned home with examples, and surged in popularity both here and internationally following Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. At present, there are some 250 bonsai societies in North America, though some worry that, thanks to mass-marketed ersatz bonsai ***trees***, interest in the real thing may be tailing off.

Since the ***trees*** can live for hundreds of years, long-term care is also a problem. Not every son or daughter wants to take over the family bonsai collection, and it may not be long before botanical gardens are bulging with orphaned

little ***trees***.

Small as they are, bonsai ***trees*** are not genetic dwarfs. Instead, they can be created from virtually any ***tree*** or shrub by pruning its crown and roots and confining it to a pot to restrict growth. The plant is trained by wrapping copper or aluminum wire around the trunk and branches to bend them to the artist's vision. After a year or so, the ***tree*** has taken the desired shape, and the wire can be removed.

The serious bonsai artist is well-equipped with specialized tools like concave cutters and coir brushes, and fusses over the delicate plants, paying meticulous attention to growing media, watering and the like. And while there may be vigorous debate among practitioners about the merits of soil mixes and organic versus chemical fertilizers, it remains a civilized debate.

(You can learn more by joining the Ottawa Bonsai Society or taking its courses. Go to ottawabonsai.org for information.)

While some bonsai artists just head to the local big box store for their potted stock, others cruise remote outdoor spots for wild plants that catch their interest. Most say they have no idea what the end product will look like, and that, like all sculptors, they find the creation in the act of creating.

"It's a living art form, a joint effort between ***nature*** and man," says Barney Shum, who co-founded the Ottawa Bonsai Society some 25 years ago. Shum is politely dismissive of those artists "who impose their will on the ***tree***."

Bonsai, he continues, is "an idealized version of ***nature***. It's meant to be contemplated. Its simplicity helps create harmony in you."

Shum, a computer systems manager at Library and Archives Canada and a photography hobbyist, talks about bonsai in terms of composition, mass and space and repetition of form, as does any visual artist.

"Bonsai is based on eastern philosophy, the idea of empty space. If you think of the empty space (that's created by pruning the foliage), then the mass becomes interesting. Your eye and your brain automatically follow the shape of the mass."

Shum, too, says bonsai tells stories. One of his most striking pieces is the "mother and child," a sweeping ***sculpture*** consisting of a large and a smaller mass that suggest a mother protecting her child from the force of the wind.

Why does he practice bonsai?

"After working all day, you decompress before dinner with bonsai and a glass of wine and Mozart in the background. It's that contemplative, peaceful state after the high pressure of the computer systems world. It's the yin and yang."

The Ottawa Bonsai Society is exhibiting at Japan Day tomorrow at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Graphic

Photo: Jana Chytilova, The Ottawa Citizen; Vianney Leduc shows off his eastern white cedar, during the annual show of the Ottawa Bonsai Society, held at the Japanese Embassy. He has worked on his bonsai creation for seven years. ;

Photo: Jana Chytilova, The Ottawa Citizen; Other creations on display at the show include, from left, a Ficas Retusa, false cypress and boxwood. ;

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